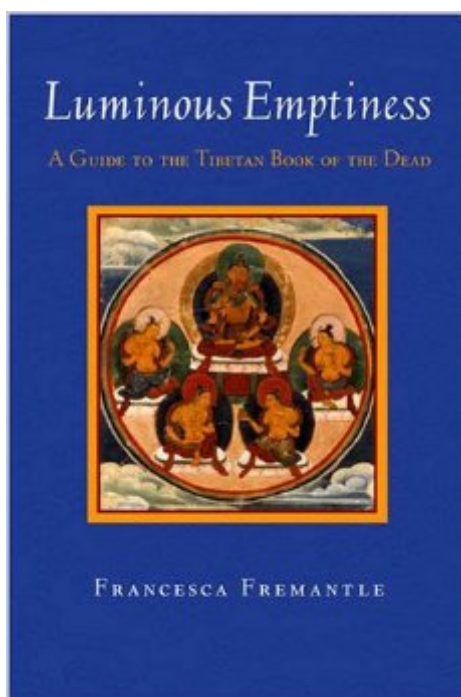


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# Luminous Emptiness: Understanding The Tibetan Book Of The Dead



## Synopsis

The Tibetan Book of the Dead, a best-seller for three decades, is one of the most widely read texts of Tibetan Buddhism. Over the years, it has been studied and cherished by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. *Luminous Emptiness* is a detailed guide to this classic work, elucidating its mysterious concepts, terms, and imagery. Fremantle relates the symbolic world of the Tibetan Book of the Dead to the experiences of everyday life, presenting the text not as a scripture for the dying, but as a guide for the living. According to the Buddhist view, nothing is permanent or fixed. The entire world of our experience is constantly appearing and disappearing at every moment. Using vivid and dramatic imagery, the Tibetan Book of the Dead presents the notion that most of us are living in a dream that will continue from lifetime to lifetime until we truly awaken by becoming enlightened. Here, Fremantle, who worked closely with ChÃ¶gyam Trungpa on the 1975 translation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead (Shambhala), brings the expertise of a lifetime of study to rendering this intriguing classic more accessible and meaningful to the living. *Luminous Emptiness* features in-depth explanations of: The Tibetan Buddhist notions of death and rebirth The meaning of the five energies and the five elements in Tibetan Buddhism The mental and physical experience of dying, according to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Having been a practitioner and student of Buddhism myself for over 36 years, I can honestly say that *Luminous Emptiness* is the most comprehensive and clear presentation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead that I have ever read. Fremantle explains every topic she addresses clearly, simply,

lucidly and thoroughly, without the confusing jargon that so often leaves the reader lost and confused in other similar books. One senses behind her written words the presence of a compassionate, knowledgeable and gentle friend who wants to make sure that you understand everything she is presenting. Luminous Emptiness by Francesca Fremantle is a must-read for anyone interested not only in the Tibetan Book of the Dead, but in Tibetan Buddhism in general and Dzogchen as well -- beginner and advanced students alike.

This commentary on "Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead" combines an extended introduction to the fundamentals of Vajra teachings, an advanced form of "dzogchen" Tibetan teachings, with the text itself, interspersed with her explanations. The misleadingly titled TBoD directs the departed soul which finds itself in need of listening to a posthumous recital by a living guide to achieve its "Great Liberation by Hearing in the Bardo-- or Intermediate or Transitional Realm." You can see even from such vocabulary how this book discusses terms beyond the level of absolute beginners to Buddhism. Fremantle, as an English Sanskrit scholar who then came to translate Tibetan and practice at an elevated level its instruction, does enable those with no previous exposure to follow her fascinating insights and elegantly composed discussion. However, I'd suggest that one may wish to begin with Stephen Hodge & Martin Boord's concise translation with an ecumenically accessible brief commentary, published as "The Illustrated Tibetan Book of the Dead," for an overview. Such preparation would assist the learner; I found Hodge & Boord only after finishing Fremantle, but I'd recommend progressing the other way around! I faced many conceptual difficulties as I began this work. Like a philosophical treatise, Dr. Fremantle's exegesis builds inexorably, but sentence stacked on sentence. It demands slow, careful, active engagement. This work cannot be skimmed, used as a time-filler, or as light inspirational encouragement. It's one of the most serious, formidable, and valuable books I've encountered. Fremantle, except for a few paragraphs in her preface, self-effaces herself entirely from the text. She makes her presence transparent, filtering her academic knowledge and her own dharma elucidation into a complimentary study that explores the TBoD as a book for the living, not only the dead-- for the latter group already may be beyond its appeals. We, however, can learn from it how to recognize the manifestations of what she calls our "buddha-nature," our primordial state that combines the emptiness of constancy beyond time or space with the luminosity of an actively generated matrix of energy. This all sounds arcane, but Fremantle strives to keep her focus accessible, and if you persist with what may be one of the most important books you'll ever find, gradual enlightenment will begin. Trust me, it's a challenge if, like me, you know little about Buddhism. Yet, it's such a bracing intellectual and

psychological trek. You begin slowly to comprehend Buddhism's message from the TBoD: "like the moon reflected in water," (253) visions of the deities as peaceful or wrathful, colors and sounds generated in these bardo journeys, and fractured space and time all represent only our own nature. All's illusory in the sense that nothing's permanent. Our minds, the TBoD implies, are nine times sharper in the afterlife, so Fremantle interprets this to show how much more powerful imagery will be and also how much more capable we may be-- if prepared by meditation and "creation" and "deity yoga" under a guru's supervision-- to recognize all the TBoD tells us reduces to our own "self-display." No gods threaten or cajole outside of our own qualities. These become analogues, to be heard and seen. The TBoD is recited so the dead person's soul can learn to take advantage and overcome fear so nirvana-- "passing beyond suffering" in Tibetan rendering-- can occur and enlightenment can free us by extinguishing our ego, which keeps getting lured in the bardo into another subsequent round of life in "samsara." TBoD, Fremantle emphasizes, expresses our own imminence. We can begin to see glimpses of this awakened state here, on earth, if we try. Our everyday choices can be linked to the symbols of the TBoD, and here, as with the realm of hungry ghosts and the "four false views," she articulates the mundane equivalents to these overwhelming otherworldly immersions well. Our own qualities, powers, and functions, she stresses, provide the true counterparts for the deities imagined. The visions in the bardo turn "samsara" inside out, the daily phenomena we witness but may not perceive in its transformed quality. It's aimed at "sacred vision," and while we're trapped in language to convey its meaning, ultimately the TBoD pushes us beyond its symbolic forms into inexpressible magic. Again, this may all sound too proverbial or platitudinous until you make your way with awareness and concentration, and it will begin to become clarified if you have the stamina to remain on this arduous but rewarding narrow path to wisdom. A good summation late in the book, pp. 340-44, may serve as a resting place and a point to pause and recoup near the summit. She warns us against what her guru, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, castigated as "spiritual materialism," our tendency to hang on to a particular state of our soul's evolution, rather than to accept "hopelessness," to let ourselves with a trust in "crazy wisdom" let go into seeing the TBoD as representing, as if in a funhouse mirror, our own present possibility, unveiled. It's a daunting task, but Fremantle's example, with learning to anchor her counsel, may prove the goad we need to delve further-- in her earlier work with Trungpa, in the versions of the TBoD by Robert Thurman or Hodge & Boord, and the similar elaborations on its meaning as Sogyal Rinpoche's "Tibetan Book of Living & Dying." The book has been prepared with great care. It's written beautifully, yet without the author interfering with her teaching. This skill must be credited to her own practice of its teaching, and she avoids what I assume for lesser scholars might be the

impulse to assert her own theories. Instead, she tells us about them. While her book does not go into any real detail about how we can do this according to specific meditation practices, this undoubtably can be obtained from other sources. I'd have liked a glossary rather than an index with a few terms in parentheses, and the endnotes are not always as helpful as I'd wished. These remain minor shortcomings in a text that on every page tells of its depth and mindfulness. The sun is always, she urges us, behind the clouds, and the chance to reach our fulfillment waits for us.

I am not a Buddhist. I wanted to learn about Tibetan Buddhism, but the Tibetan Book of the Dead was impossible! This is comprehensive, but explained very well - in layman's terms. Exactly what I wanted. I would agree with another reviewer who says there is so much information it can lead to overload, but I am working through it slowly.

Comprehensive discussion on Bardo the "intermediate-state" after death; extensive from the Nyingma Buddhist tradition as well as information on the Bardo of dreams and meditation. Teachings on what to expect after death and how to practice transforming body, speech & mind to overcome karmic hinderances. Very in-depth and methodological approach. Blurb: Francesca Fremantle Ph.D. studied Sanskrit and Tibetan (languages) before collaborating with Chogyam Trungpa in 1975 in translating *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Shambala Pocket Classics) Francesca Fremantle presents this text not as solely to be read to the dying but as a guide for living.

Unless you already have an in-depth knowledge of Buddhism, most readers probably will have difficulty absorbing the material presented in Fremantle's *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. In my case, I chose to read this book after finishing *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, naïvely thinking that, given the title of Fremantle's book, it would help further illuminate these esoteric concepts. Unfortunately, I'm even more confused after reading her book. Laden with Buddhist terminology, symbols, and iconography, it is difficult to see the forest because of the trees in this book. To me, she was unable to put herself in the shoes of the average reader interested in these concepts but lacking the in-depth understandings that are second nature to her. It's like she's preaching to the choir of similar thinkers with similar expertise. Although Buddhist doctrine and concepts can be difficult to integrate into the western mindset, others have successfully managed to do it to varying degrees. For example, the Dalai Lama, himself, has authored several very readable, illuminating

books on Buddhist philosophy. In another example, Sogyal Rinpoche's "The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying" is an excellent read, nicely summarizing the bardos associated with death and rebirth. Finally, on an entertaining level, "The Lhasa Trilogy" by Gary Conrad is an engaging novel about an individual going through these bardos, introducing many Buddhist concepts about karma, death, and reincarnation in a palatable form to general audiences. Perhaps, it is best to consider Fremantle's book as a reference once more thorough understandings are acquired through other sources.

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